Sharona Blank made aliya in 1995 with her husband Yehshua and her two children. She was always very Zionistic and came on numerous trips to Israel with her family as a child. She also learned for a year in ' Michaela' and did a year of internship for social work in Israel. When started dating boys she would only date a guy who was also aliya minded. It helped her that when she made aliya, most of her family as well as her husband's family had already moved to Israel.

Initially aliya was hard for her, there was no 'Nefesh B'enefesh' back then, but after the initial six months, they settled in, and they are still thrilled to this day that they came. She was very lucky, because when they made aliya she thought she would wait a while to start working, but a position opened up in Efrat in the social service department of the local council and she started working two months after getting here. That was the best 'Ulpan' she could ever recommend and she has been working there ever since. In terms of the family, they tried to make aliya when their children were still very young so the adjustments would not be enormous.

Before she made aliya Sharona worked for five years in America in a field of special needs. She did an internship in the Lexington school for the deaf. After finishing her internship she worked in 'Mishkon' - a home for developmentally delayed children and young adults.

Sharona always wanted to work in a field where she could help people, therefore she chose social work even though many people tried to dissuade her since the salary for social work in Israel is quite low, but she knew that most salaries are not amazing and decided to work in a field that she would enjoy, feeling that she is doing something meaningful.

She found her job after she made aliya and she was not even looking for one. She began as a general social worker in 'revacha'(social service), dealing with different issues. It was a great way for her to learn how the system works, connect with various government agencies, and improve her Hebrew. After a year of gaining this experience, the position of director of child development center in Efrat opened up and she started working in the field that was very close to her heart, which is the social needs population. She was in that position for 12-13 years and then when the center closed she went back to working for the welfare, but this time with focus on the special needs population.

**- 2 -**

Today Sharona is in charge of the families in Efrat who come to the welfare. Generally she helps them financially, and with therapy.

Recently a special exiting experience occurred at Sharona's work when she met the mother of a child who she had worked within the child development center. The child had been born at 25 weeks, which is extremely premature for a newborn. The prognosis for the newborn was very low they were not sure if he will survive, but still he survived. The mother told her that the child Healthy know and he has no medical problems caused form the early birth and he is learning in a regular classroom.

Sharona feels that her job help to improve other people's lives, many times parents of children with special needs are very overwhelmed and don’t know how to handle all of their problems and who should they ask for their help. She feels that she can help them make their lives more organized, talk with them through the difficulties and connect them with the right people and services that could help them. She especially fined herself helpful to 'olim' who don’t know the system and the language. Sharona loves working with parents of special needs children, but because she works the welfare they hired her as a general worker. Because of that fact she must fulfill other responsibilities other than helping special needs families. Sharona says that she wishes that she would be able to dedicate all her time to what she enjoys and not have to be involved cases that are not include helping families with special needs children.

Sharona says that there are many teenagers in Efrat who volunteer with families of the welfare. Last year around 30 families with children with special needs had a weekly volunteer (big brother/big sister). They came to play or learn with them once a week. The children really look forward to these weakly meetings. The volunteers sometimes get professional guidance from speeches with therapists or occupational therapists so they can work with the children on specific goals and make them go through some kind of progress. The other area where teenagers help with special needs population is at the family happenings that she organizes. The volunteers plan and run games, all kind of activities for the children. Sharona tells that the happenings are such a rewarding experience for the children with special needs.

Sharona emphasizes that there is a high awareness in Efrat regarding special needs. She thinks this is partially due to a very Anglo-Saxon community. However, there is always room for improvement, for example more afternoon classes ('chugim') for children with special needs or ways to include them with volunteers in regular 'chugim'.

**- 3 -**

One specific goal she is working on right now is to open an afternoon program ('moadonit') for children with special needs. Unfortunately, children with special needs cannot join the regular 'moadonit' of the welfare, because the staff in the 'moadonit' is not trained to deal with their various issues and needs. In order to achieve her goal she is now putting together a mapping of needs, and then she will see if they can get approval from the welfare. Sharona is saying that the most difficult

will be to find a building to house the 'moadonit' because there is a real shortage of buildings in Efrat now.

Sometimes, when Sharona sees the struggles of the people she works with, it helps her appreciate her own personal struggles in her life and challenges with her own children.

Her job has taught her that life is not easy, but when someone gets the right support and guidance, his life can be a little easier and brighter. No one can take away a disability, but they can help ease the burden and the pain, trying to find ways to cope better with a difficult reality.

Sharona sees herself continuing in this field for the next five years, though she is not sure yet if that will be in this job or another.

Sharona has a message for teenagers: "when you start to consider a career, choose something that you feel you will get satisfaction from. People told me I was crazy to go into social work as I was planning to make 'aliya' and social work is definitely not a very lucrative field, but I needed a profession that would give me satisfaction, and how much does anyone actually make?"

Sharona hopes to continue to help the social needs population in the future.

**- 4 -**